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**HEADLINE:**

Agency Creativity:  
Teams and Performance

**SUBHEADLINE:**

A Conceptual Model Links Agency Teams'  
Knowledge Utilization, Agency Creativity, and Performance

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**ABSTRACT**

Agency creativity is a product of team efforts where members interact to share knowledge, skills, and expertise to produce creative campaigns. For an agency, this is an invaluable resource. Using a multidisciplinary approach, the authors of the current paper proposed a conceptual model that links teams' knowledge utilization, agency creativity, and performance. By considering incremental and radical creativity, the model also builds on the idea that creativity is a multidimensional construct. The framework is presented to act as a catalyst upon which to build future empirical research on the nature of team creativity within advertising agencies.

**MANAGEMENT SLANT**

- Team knowledge utilization in agencies is a key resource for agency creativity and performance and needs careful management.
- Agencies with strong relational ties have better access to data and consumer insight and have the potential to produce more radical creativity. However, this is contingent on market conditions for the brand.

- Agencies need to work more closely with clients to establish the true nature of the problem for the brand and market uncertainty to assess the type of creativity required.
- Agency teams who embrace diversity within their teams will enhance the creative product.

## INTRODUCTION

“Advertising creativity” may be described as the process of developing and producing creative advertisements (El-Murad and West, 2004; Reid, King, and DeLorme, 1998; Sasser, Koslow, and Riordan, 2007). From an output perspective, creativity is the “big idea” behind any advertisement or campaign (Hill and Johnson, 2003; Rossiter, 2008). It also has been referred to as the “creative quality” of agency teams in producing innovative advertisements (O’Connor, Willermain, and MacLachlan, 1996; Smith and Yang, 2004), which some refer to as “agency creativity”—a subset of advertising creativity (Li, Dou, Wang, and Zhou, 2008).

The current authors define “agency creativity” as the extent to which agency teams develop campaign ideas (and advertising strategy)—which may be radical or incremental—to solve clients’ problems as perceived by managers.

One of the most interesting questions posed by researchers is “Why are some advertising campaigns more creative than others?” (*e.g.*, Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan, 2006; O’Connor, Koslow, Kilgour, and Sasser 2016;). An equally important aspect to consider, however, is not the campaign itself, but the resources required to achieve extraordinary creative work. It could be argued that a better question for researchers might be: “Why are some agencies more creative than others?” Or even: “Why are some teams within agencies more creative than others?”

Such consideration, in turn, inevitably refocuses the discussion upon the resource-based view of any organization (Wernerfelt, 1984), which suggests that the management of resources is key to market competition.

The evidence suggests that resources that are valuable, rare and inimitable will enhance the performance of an organization or a subset within (*e.g.*, Barney, 1986, 1991; 2001; Prahalad and Hamel, 1990). One thing is certain: Advertising agencies could not deliver client solutions without using the knowledge, skills, and expertise of their teams.

Such teams often are multidisciplinary and multi-functional (Ensor, Cottam, and Band, 2000) and involve different skill sets and experience. Nevertheless, the selection of the individuals to be members of a particular team has been found to be somewhat “fluid” and described by some observers as “chaotic” (Ensor *et al.*, 2000; Johar, Holbrook, and Stern, 2001).

Alongside tenacious project oversight, the ability to form (and re-form) teams to meet the demands of clients are key assets of agency management. Despite this, research in the field of advertising creativity traditionally has focused heavily on the perspective of the individual (*i.e.*, the copy writer or art director). Quite simply, much of the current literature explores creativity at the individual level despite the knowledge that creativity occurs and emerges at the team level (Anderson, De Dreu, Nijstad, 2004; Anderson, Potočnik, and Zhou, 2014; Woodman, Griffiths, and Sawyer, 2003).

The central point: Team creativity is not merely the aggregation of individual creativity (Drazin, Glynn and Kazanijan, 1999). Furthermore, the processes or mechanisms by which successful collaboration is achieved remain unclear.

## **CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK**

To gain understanding of the phenomenon of teams and creativity, the current paper takes an interdisciplinary stance, drawing upon the team-diversity, knowledge-utilization, and relational-ties literatures as each is applied to advertising creativity. To that end, the authors offer a conceptual model—along with several propositions—with the aim of addressing a much-neglected area of research, specifically the nature and form of team creativity within advertising agencies (See Figure 1).

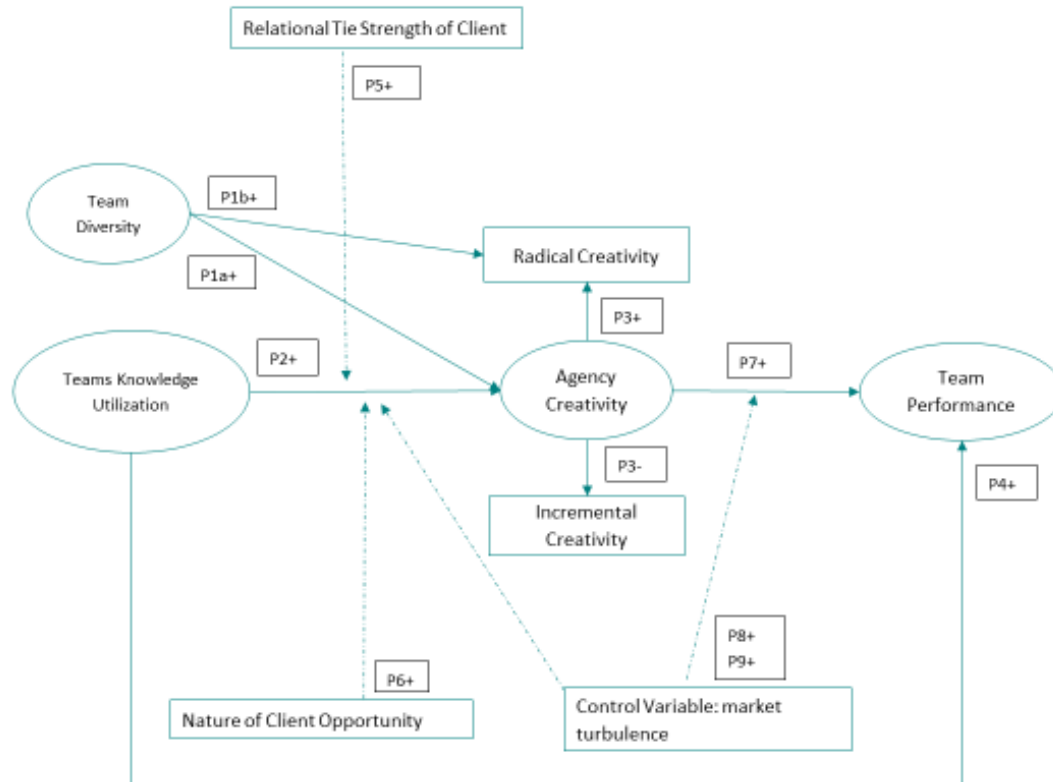
The process begins with “Team Diversity” wherein the makeup of the campaign team is explored (See Figure1). “Teams Knowledge Utilization” (TKU) also is considered and the current study explores whether TKU facilitates agency creativity and performance.

“Agency Creativity,” the next phase in the process, addresses considerations of whether the creative teams produce radical or incremental ideas on a continuum from “incremental” to “breakthrough” (George, 2007, Madjar, Greenberg and Chen, 2011) and whether that activity may require different processes (Madjar, *et al.*, 2011, Unsworth, 2001). This perspective is borrowed from the “radical” versus “incremental” innovation literature.

Exploring the model further, the current authors suggest that the relationship between TKU and agency creativity is moderated by “Relational Tie Strength of the Client” and the “Nature of the Client Opportunity.”

Advertising creativity is different from other types of creativity because it must achieve objectives set by others (El-Murad and West, 2004). Moreover, as it is commercially driven (Dahlén, Rosengren, and Torn, 2008), it is subject to the constraints of the agency and client approval systems (Bell, 1992). These external influences are critical, and the strength of the relational ties with the agency and the nature of the client opportunity need to be reviewed. The final part of the process involves “Team Performance,” the link between agency creativity and performance.

Within the entire architecture of creativity, moreover, the authors recognize “market turbulence” as a control variable that may influence team knowledge utilization, agency creativity, and team-performance relationships.



**Figure 1: Creativity and Teams Knowledge Utilization**

## TEAMS AND DIVERSITY

Earlier literature has defined “teams” as “a collection of individuals who are interdependent in their tasks and who share responsibilities for outcomes” (Cohen and Bailey 1997). In a knowledge-management context, teams are “complex, dynamic systems, existing in large systemic contexts of people, tasks, technologies and settings” (Ilgen 2005 p. 519).

In fact, there are a number of typologies of teams that add new nuances to help define teams (*e.g.*, Cohen and Bailey 1997; De Dreu and Weingart 2003, Devine 2002). Defining teams, however, is more complex than simply addressing various typologies; teams in today’s organizations are more complex (Hollenbeck, Beersma and Schouten 2012) and, consequentially, may be more fluid and temporary.

Teams in advertising agencies tend to be formed around the specific elements of a client brief and, as such, often are cross functional and also may be *ad hoc* and temporary in nature. In this sense, the authors believe the following definition may be more apt:

“The responsibility...often overlaps between two or more departments.... These teams or task forces allow for lateral contact between multiple departments...(and) tend to be

temporary groups that exist for the duration of the designated activity.... (These temporary groups) are often used for non-routine tasks.... (They) promote rather than inhibit cooperation across functional boundaries” (Pinto, Pinto, and Prescott, 1993, pp. 1283 -1284).

There is no exact template for an agency creative team. Hollywood and the general-interest media persist with the notion of the core team (a copywriter/art director relationship with a senior creative director as mentor), the assemblage is far more complex in everyday business practice.

Much depends on the nature of a client’s particular task at hand and the utilization of media in the mix. For the latter, the generally accepted terms of “traditional” and “new” media are well understood. To a great degree, however, that distinction already has become a misnomer with the maturation of digital media. What advertiser embarks on a communications campaign today without considering Google and search engine optimization (SEO)? Which brand steward would consider a marketing plan complete without social media?

So-called “new” media have become integral parts of most advertising campaigns and, in effect, have become new “traditional” components. And, from a personnel/operational perspective, such “new” creative challenges have redefined the central team role of the art directors and copywriters in creative teams.

Although the campaign strategy may well emerge from the combined team efforts of the relationship between the account director and the agency’s planning/strategy team, the translation of such insight to new-media creative executions requires specialist knowledge. As such, a number of specialists with a variety of designations have joined agency teams. They include titles unimagined even just a few years ago including

- “community manager,”
- “designer/specialist,”
- “digital account director,”
- “digital copywriter/art director,”
- “digital creative director,”
- “digital media,”
- “digital account planner/researcher,”
- “SEO specialist,” and even
- “creative technologist.”

And the titles are not empty descriptions: Specific skills and knowledge now are required to execute core creative strategies across both new and legacy media. And such expertise often is beyond the skill sets of most copywriter/art director teams. For example, developing a storyboard for a television campaign demands far less specialist knowledge than developing a relevant social-media campaign or the identification of the role of SEO.

It’s important to recognize that although the final creative product often is the most easily recognized element of an agency’s identity, the development of that work is grounded in a

number of business disciplines: Account teams and client-service teams long have been parts of the creative-direction development.

Recently, the importance of planning and strategy has gained more influence in the creative process within the literature (Koslow, 2015). Additionally, in practice, new client/agency relationships are becoming established where “hot-house” teams of key specialists—often including client representation—come together to make the process more “agile” with impacts on the type of creativity developed.

The client-facing team has become multidisciplinary, with a creative director, an account director and head of planning/strategy acting as important members. From an internal perspective cross-functional teams exist to develop the ideas, which may draw on other functional or specialist areas in the development and activation of the campaign. Agencies rely on cross-functional teams to solve the complex challenges of clients, and a number of new digital agencies are adopting new models of operating where cross-functional teams exist from the outset of the campaign, which could prove more favorable for women (Mallia and Windels, 2011).

Demographic diversity in favor of women and ethnicity is a key issue for the advertising industry as clients increasingly demand greater diversity within agency workforces<sup>1,2</sup>; thus the rich literature on the link between team diversity and performance is relevant. The current authors note that in the context of the paucity of the currently available empirical evidence on gender and ethnicity, team diversity in this article instead refers to differences with regard to the task-related aspect of functional background, education, and tenure, which are associated with the information/decision-making perspective, where the evidence is more conclusive.

Team diversity refers to “the distribution of differences among members of a team with respect to a common attribute” (Harrison and Klein, 2007). Different demographic variables may influence team performance negatively or positively (*e.g.*, Milliken and Martins, 1996; Pelled, 1996; Williams and O’Reilly, 1998; van Knippenberg, Dreu, and Homan, 2004).

In relation to performance, team–diversity research has concentrated on demographic variables (*e.g.*, age, gender, ethnicity) and/or job related characteristics (*e.g.*, functional background, tenure), but has, to date, produced equivocal results (*e.g.*, Bell 2007; Bell, Villado, Lukasik, Belau, and Briggs, 2011; van Dijk Egen, and Knippenberg, 2012; Hoever *et al.*, 2012; Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007; Hülshager, Anderson, and Salgado, 2009; Joshi and Roh, 2009; Milliken and

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<sup>1</sup> “Verizon Is the Latest Client to Demand More Diversity from Its Agencies.” Adweek.com, September 30, 2016. Retrieved January 11, 2017 from <http://www.adweek.com/agencyspy/verizon-is-the-latest-client-to-demand-more-diversity-from-its-agencies/117921>.

<sup>2</sup> “Lack of Diversity in advertising Is Not Only About Hiring.” Thedrum.com, September 9 2016. Retrieved January 11, 2017 from <http://www.thedrum.com/news/2016/09/09/lack-diversity-advertising-not-only-about-hiring>

Martins, 1996; van der Vegt and Bunderson, 2005; van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004; van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007; Webber and Donahue, 2001; Williams and O'Reilly, 1998).

Such evidence strongly suggests that the team diversity-performance relationship is not a simple function of such characteristics as age or ethnicity and may instead depend upon other factors such as task complexity (*e.g.*, van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004) and/or the type of performance required (*e.g.*, Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007). The evidence indicates, however, that when creativity or innovation is at stake, then the variables of education and job function are positively related to team performance, whereas variables such as age, sex, and ethnicity are not (Bell, *et al.* 2011). Team performance improves because a team which is rich in task-related demographic variables has more opportunity to draw on knowledge from a greater variety of perspectives and task-relevant information (Hülsheger, *et al.*, 2009; van Dijk *et al.*, 2012).

There are three central theories that underlie team diversity and performance:

- The **similarity-attraction paradigm** (Byrne, 1971) advocates that homogeneous teams should perform better because of the mutual attraction of team members with similar attributes. The result will be better communication and team processes.
- **Social categorization** is closely linked to the similarity-attraction paradigm, with the difference that team members categorize each other into subgroups and favor the delineation within the team (Brewer, 1979). People who are similar are attracted to each other and more likely will work together.

In addition, in social categorization, performance increases with the degree of group homogeneity; the more homogenous the work group becomes, the better the performance (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004). In such instances, creative teams (*i.e.*, art directors and copywriters) share similar mental models and are on the same “wavelength” (Johar *et al.*, 2001).

Building on this more recent notion of “creative fit,” additional research has proposed that creative people who share similar styles to their creative directors more likely will get their work approved (Stuhlfaut and Windels, 2012). Rather than being a benefit, however, some contend that this lack of intragroup diversity potentially may limit creativity (King and Anderson, 1990).

- The **information-decision-making** perspective conversely proposes that heterogeneous groups should outperform homogeneous groups on the basis that diverse groups will have more access to a wider pool of task relevant knowledge, skills, and abilities. Such diversity, the theory continues, brings different opinions to the fore, which may be useful for creativity and innovation (van Knippenberg *et al.*, 2004; van Knippenberg and Schippers, 2007).

In such team constructs, conflicting ideas will force the group to consider various perspectives, ideas, and information more deeply and, therefore, the fuller perspective may lead to more creative ideas and solutions (Ancona and Caldwell, 1992).



There is a wealth of research over the last 30 years within the domain of innovation that identifies team-level variables that may facilitate or impede innovation in organizations (Hülshager *et al.*, 2009). For example, one study argues that team diversity, size, and tenure are important antecedents to innovation (Anderson and West, 1996). “Other factors include task characteristics, group knowledge diversity and skills, external demands and integrating group processes.” Additionally, “Diversity of knowledge and skills is a powerful predictor of innovation” (West, 2002).

Despite the research into the effectiveness of teams within the innovation literature, there still is very little understanding of the antecedents of team creativity and innovation, or how team creativity is linked to performance. What has been established is that diversity has been positively related to innovative behavior (van de Vegt and Janssen, 2003) and the type of outcome required—*e.g.*, new product development—may require more functional diversity than demographic diversity (Horwitz and Horwitz, 2007), as cognitive and higher-order thinking is required. This may be particularly true for advertising agencies, where the end product of creativity is the very reason for the existence of the service supplier.

The evidence from the innovation literature suggests that diversity will contribute to team creativity because team members from different functional backgrounds have different skills, expertise, and knowledge, which help to solve complex tasks (Hülshager, *et al.*, 2009).

What emerges from this understanding is an apparent contradiction:

- On the one hand, group diversity leads to better performance due to more exposure to different perspectives.
- The downside is low group cohesion (or even conflict) that could adversely affect performance.

Alternatively, in homogeneous groups situations of groupthink and consensus could lead to less creative performance outcomes. Diversity also brings together members with different cognitive patterns (Somech and Drach-Zahavy, 2001) and generates communication with members outside the team (Hülshager, *et al.*, 2009).

When applied to an advertising context, the core team members of campaign teams include creative people, account executives, and strategists (planners). Previous research has highlighted that functional diversity has resulted in a greater number of ideas for consideration (Sethi, Smith, and Park 2001).

The evidence, in sum, suggests that diverse teams lead to the exposure of different perspectives, while homogeneity encourages a blander consensus. This leads to the following propositions:

- P1a:** Functional diversity within agency teams is positively related to agency creativity.
- P1b:** Functional diversity will enhance radical agency creativity more than incremental creativity.

## TEAM KNOWLEDGE UTILIZATION

Research in team creativity has continued to grow (Anderson *et al.*, 2004; 2014) and may be defined as: “The generation of novel and useful ideas based on collaborative exchange of perspectives, thoughts, and information” (Paulus, Dzindolet, and Kohn, 2011).

Team working should lead to the generation of more novel ideas and creative outcomes because of the cross fertilization of ideas (Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Tesluk *et al.*, 1997). The benefits of team working lie in the diversity of input, sharing of knowledge and communication by team members.

In multidisciplinary teams, for instance, when individuals share knowledge, information, and expertise, there may be a better outcome to the challenge at hand (*e.g.* Van der Vegt and Bunderson, 2005, West 2002) This knowledge forms a useful resource (Williams and O’Reilly, 1998) and capability for organizations (Teece, Pisano, and Shuen, 1997), while sharing promotes learning that leads to cross-fertilization of ideas and creativity (*e.g.*, Ancona and Caldwell, 1992; Bantel and Jackson, 1989; Miliken and Martins, 1996).

Despite a considerable body of research, there is no conclusive evidence to support team diversity’s effect on performance either way. Studies on emergent-team processes, which facilitate the exchange of diverse information and knowledge (Anderson *et al.*, 2004; Hülsheger *et al.*, 2009; Milliken *et al.*, 2003), do suggest one possible source for further understanding, as demonstrated by exercises in team-learning behavior (*e.g.*, van der Vegt, and Bunderson, 2005) and information elaboration (*e.g.*, van Knipppenberg *et al.*, 2004).

Nevertheless, information sharing does not guarantee knowledge integration (Hoever *et al.*, 2012). Indeed, in her 1996 text, “*Creativity in Context: Update to the Social Psychology of Creativity*,” Teresa M. Amabile introduced a componential model emphasizing that domain specific knowledge, creative processes, and utilization of knowledge are necessary for creativity.

Drawing from the knowledge management literature there are two streams of research: content and process approaches (Sung and Choi, 2009), which mirror the team creativity-performance relationship approach (*e.g.*, Hülsheger *et al.*, 2009).

- **Content Research**

The literature includes studies on such topics as tacit-versus-explicit knowledge (Ewing and West, 2000; Griffith and Sawyer, 2010) and procedural-versus declarative knowledge (Akgun *et al.*, 2008) and focuses on what is known and the types of knowledge.

More recently, research in the field of knowledge content suggests that the greater the quantity of unique information, the greater the likelihood that this information will result in creativity (Perry-Smith, 2014).

- **Process Research**

Knowledge, alone, is not enough; it needs to be applied (Griffith and Sawyer, 2010) and, therefore, the process of utilizing knowledge becomes more important.

Knowledge utilization by team members leads to learning and incorporates higher-order thinking (Gino *et al.*, 2010) that may lead to a team's ability to produce novel ideas and practical solutions (Sung and Choi, 2012). But, the process approach focuses on the way in which knowledge is shared and utilized among individuals (*e.g.*, Gino *et al.*, 2010).

Team creativity is positively related to team knowledge management, which is a combination of team knowledge stock (TKS) and team knowledge utilization (TKU) (Sung and Choi, 2012).

TKS is defined as "a combination of task relevant knowledge and skills possessed by members and the leader of the team," whereas TKU is an overarching construct that "indicates the extent to which the pool of available knowledge and expertise is activated and exploited within teams" (Sung and Choi, 2012, p.5). Moreover, the mere possession of knowledge is insufficient, and the way it is shared and used to solve problems is key (Griffiths and Sawyer, 2010), proving that knowledge stock may be contingent on other contextual processes *e.g.*, leadership, learning climate, and trust (Hülshager *et al.*, 2009).

The lesson is simple: What you do with knowledge is more important than what you know (Gino *et al.*, 2010), and that when exploited, TKU will enhance team performance. As such, the following propositions are offered:

- P2:** Team knowledge utilization is positively related to agency creativity.
- P3:** The relationship between team knowledge utilization and radical agency creativity will be stronger than the relationship between team knowledge utilization and incremental agency creativity.
- P4:** Team knowledge utilization is positively related to team performance.

### **Client Relational Ties and Problem Clarity**

Research on agency-client relationships is "limited and perplexing" (Sasser, Koslow, and Kilgour, 2013). Early studies investigated the agency-client life cycle (*e.g.*, Wackman, Wackman, and Solomon, 1986; Verbeke, 1988). More recently the area of institutionalized creativity and client-agency relationships has been explored (Vafeas and Hughes, 2016).

Despite the importance of the agency-client partnership, the research evidence on the subject often is contradictory. Moreover, the influence of the client may take many forms (Waller, Shao, and Bao, 2010), and forms part of a very complex system (Sasser *et al.*, 2013). And advertisers who had a low propensity to take risks limited the ability of the agency in terms of creativity (West, 1999).

The influence of the client—sometimes referred to as the "marketer" (*e.g.*, Koslow, Sasser, and Riordan, 2006) or advertiser *e.g.*, (Sasser *et al.*, 2013; Wang *et al.*, 2013)—appears in the literature in a number of guises. Topics of consideration have included the attitude toward risk (*e.g.*, El-Murad and West, 2003) the relationship with the agency and stability of the brand (*e.g.*, Sasser *et al.*, 2013), and knowledge and power (Wang *et al.*, 2013). An additional area worthy of consideration from the main creativity literature is problem clarity and type (*e.g.*, Tang, Li and Kauffman, 2016; Unsworth 2001).

- **Risk**

Research has demonstrated that a client may influence the creative outcome, because of its attitude towards risk (El-Murad and West, 2003; Sasser and Koslow, 2008). In fact, agencies may also be risk averse with no obvious reason for any differences in risk-taking propensity (Rossiter, 2008; West, 1999; West and Berthon, 1997).

Thus, it stands to reason that risk-averse clients may lead to the production of concepts of mediocre originality (West, 1999). Moreover, a client's attitude toward risk-taking therefore may influence the creativity of its agency (Wang et al, 2013).

What is known is that clients, in some situations, have a low propensity to take creative risks, particularly when they consider that they have reached their prospective points (West, 1999; West and Berthon, 1997), in that they have achieved (or are close to achieving) their set goals, but also because an agency's creativity may be outside its "comfort zone" (Sullivan, 1998).

Of course, there are exceptions to the proposition that marketers are risk averse when they fail to achieve their prospect points. Clients who rely heavily on digital media for delivery of their advertising message (compared to clients more heavily reliant on traditional media) appear to be more open to riskier campaigns regardless (Kilgour *et al.*, 2013).

- **Strength of relational ties and knowledge**

Despite understanding the risk elements in relation to advertiser risk there is still relatively little known about how the client influences creativity (Wang *et al.*, 2013). To make an almost tautological point: clients have the most powerful impact on agencies influencing their creative output (Sasser *et al.*, 2013) and, of course, any agency's creative product will vary between one client to another.

The point is that clients who are open to new ideas, who give agencies access to their research information, and who avoid high powered evaluation processes, generally enable agencies to be more creative (Koslow *et al.*, 2006). Moreover, in the more contemporary digital landscape access to the consumer behavioral data of the client is a crucial part of the creative product developed. The strength of the relational tie between the client and the agency consequently becomes more important.

The strength of relational ties, which delineates the type of bond between two or more social actors and their propensity to share information (Granovetter, 1973, Hansen, 1999), may be defined as either "strong" or "weak." The concept has been used in several different areas, for example,

- in the business-to-business literature to explain acquisition and utilization in new product alliances (*e.g.*, Ganesan, Malter, and Rindfleisch, 2005; Rindfleisch, and Moorman, 2001),
- in relation to creative interaction and social-network theory (*e.g.*, Dokko, Kane, and Tortoriello, 2014; Sosa, 2011), and
- with creativity and knowledge content (*e.g.*, Perry-Smith, 2014).

With regard to creativity, it has been argued that weak ties are positively related to creativity (*e.g.*, Perry-Smith and Shalley, 2003; Perry-Smith, 2006; Zhou, Shin, Brass, Choi, and Zhang, 2009). The duration of the tie and the communication frequency, however, are important factors and may not hold true when closeness (or emotional intensity) is measured (Perry-Smith, 2006).

In an advertising context, this line of argument also may hold true; even longstanding relationships experience peaks and troughs and passes through different stages. When a relationship is new, it may be that creativity is intense as the agency seeks to win the account (Verbeke *et al.*, 2008; Wackman *et al.*, 1986). In addition, because the duration of a relationship and the communication frequency may vary independently of closeness, it is possible that strong ties may lead to the production of better creative ideas (Sosa, 2011) and access to coveted behavioral data and insight.

Creativity is the primary reason agencies—and the larger advertising industry—exist (Koslow *et al.*, 2003; Nyilasy and Reid, 2009; Reid *et al.*, 1998, Smith and Yang, 2004).

Although some agencies believe that creativity is their primary mission and must be rewarded above effectiveness (Koslow *et al.*, 2003), clients are more focused on the market performance that results from a campaign (Wang *et al.*, 2013). This tension between client and agency is obvious and often has an impact on the client-agency relationship.

Knowledge asymmetry suggests that one party will have more knowledge and, therefore, will be more powerful in the relationship (Sharma, 1997). In an advertising-agency context, it could be argued that agencies have advertising knowledge and expertise that clients do not have, and, as a result, hold knowledge asymmetry and have more power in the relationship (Wang *et al.*, 2013).

Despite this advantage, however, the opposite is true: The locus of knowledge rests with the client, who has market research, brand performance, and other data often not made available to the agency (Sasser *et al.*, 2013). Indeed, in recent years, with the advent of digital technologies and data capture, the balance of power may be tilted even further in the direction of the client because of the vast proprietary data it has been able to compile on such subjects as purchasing trends and the marketplace performance.

In fact, it is not just access to data and market-research information that is important. Advertising agencies' skill in developing "insights" from such raw data—given their wider knowledge stock across varied and different campaign problems—provide them with a knowledge advantage that helps tilt the power balance back to their advantage.

And, in effect, it might be argued that, although clients have the better knowledge stock, the agency has the better ability to apply it.

Whichever line of argument one chooses to adopt, there are tensions in the client/agency relationship, and the existing literature does not provide much guidance on the management of

that relationship in terms of teams (Wang *et al.*, 2013). Overall, the implication is that the relational-tie strength between the clients and their agencies positively moderates the relationship between TKU and agency creativity.

- **Problem Clarity**

An important element in the role of agency teams and creativity with regard to clients is: problem clarity and problem type (*e.g.*, Tang, Li and Kaufman, 2016; Unsworth, 2001).

Problem clarity refers to whether a problem is well- or ill-defined and operates on a continuum (Dillon 1982). Ill-defined problems have more than one solution, or may have an unclear solution or have vague goals. By contrast, well-defined problems have known solutions, and clear goals (Pretz, Naples, and Sternberg, 2003). The way in which the problem is stated will help to identify how it may be solved and has been linked to creative performance (Getzels, 1975). Problem definition is important because it is the first step in the creative process (Basadur *et al.*, 2000; Mumford *et al.*, 1991).

Problems that require creative thought tend to require a high degree of novelty and may be ill-defined (Mumford and Gustafson 1988). Indeed, the evidence suggests that ambiguity may lead to creative solutions (Mumford *et al.*, 1991)

The findings suggest that problem clarity is a moderator when it comes to creativity (Tang, *et al.*, 2016). With team working, the evidence suggests that it is essential to have clear goals in order to enhance creativity based upon having a single focus on the task (Paulus and Brown, 2007; West and Richter, 2008).

Linked to problem clarity is the type of problem to be solved, which is a contextual element influencing creativity (Unsworth, 2001). Problem types occur across a spectrum from “closed” to “open” (Getzels and Csikszentmihalyi, 1967).

Building on this work, Unsworth’s (2001) typology of problem type suggest that open problems require individuals to find, invent, or discover the problem before generating a solution. Closed problems, by comparison, allow no participation in the problem definition necessitating individuals to be given pre-defined solutions.

- Different problem types can lead to the development of different types of creative solutions (Unsworth, 2001).

In an advertising context, a client may present a brief to the agency with a number of objectives and may also suggest the solution. For example, a client may stipulate that it wants to develop an app or a television campaign for a defined problem. Alternatively, another client may stipulate objectives, but leave the solution wide open.

Using this line of argument, it is clear that the nature of the problem presented by the client will affect the type of creativity that is developed.

The indications are that the type of problems presented by the client moderates the relationship between TKU and agency creativity, leading to the following propositions:

- P5:** The positive effect of TKU on agency creativity will be stronger for clients who have stronger relational ties.
- P6:** The positive effect of TKU on agency creativity is stronger for relatively more open problems than closed.

## **AGENCY CREATIVITY**

In the advertising creativity literature, two schools of thought are evident:

- Advertising creativity is about divergence (Till and Baack, 2005).
- Advertising is about divergence and relevance (Haberland and Dacin, 1992; Runco and Jaeger, 2012; Smith and Yang, 2004).

This taxonomy mirrors a similar debate in the main creativity literature, where the central dimensions of creativity are originality and appropriateness (Amabile 1983, 1996, Ford 1996, Mumford and Simonton, 1997; Runco, 2004).

Most studies in advertising creativity use two the dimensions of “original” and “appropriate” (Sasser and Koslow, 2008). Agency creativity is a subset of advertising creativity (Li *et al.*, 2008) and has been defined accordingly to reflect the fact that advertising campaigns are created by teams of creative people.

These teams include individuals with different roles and perspectives on creativity (Hirschman, 1989). The development of a “Big Idea” for an advertising campaign often involves transforming raw ideas into a robust concept or creative strategy through the identification of insight from client data, while addressing the client brief.

This only can be achieved by teams coming together and sharing skills, knowledge, and expertise to generate ideas. It is an iterative process where key personnel build on each other’s ideas and openly critique them to good effect. With a number of new digital tools and media, agency creative teams have evolved away from the legacy model of two-person teams with the addition of specialists in social media, user experience (UX), technology, and other areas of digital expertise.

Research on idea generation in teams has suggested that team creativity is based on a team’s ability to process shared information (Paulus and Brown, 2007) and that team members should have the motivation or opportunity to build on each other’s ideas (Kohn, Paulus and Choi, 2011).

If teams are to perform well on creative tasks they need to be motivated and effectively exchange information and ideas (De Dreu, Nijstad and van Knippenberg, 2008). Creative advertising more likely will emerge through a process of iterative idea generation, where teams have the freedom to develop numerous ideas before imposing constraints (Johar *et al.*, 2001). An agency’s creative success, to a great degree, will depend on its ability to interpret the client problem accurately, set clear goals, foster the generation of ideas, enable the sharing of information, motivating team members while allowing individuals considerable scope and freedom.

It has been argued that creative ideas are on a spectrum from “minor adaptations” to “radical breakthroughs” (Mumford and Gustafson 1988) and so a useful perspective for agency creativity—borrowed from the innovation literature—is the distinction between “radical” and “incremental” innovation (*e.g.*, Benner and Tushman, 2003; Dewar and Dutton, 1986; March, 1991).

More recently, research that has sought to address the different types of creative ideas has used this distinction (*e.g.*, Gilson & Madjar, 2011; Madjar *et al.*, 2011). Certainly, the notion of “radical” further is being investigated to understand how it might be achieved beyond a one-off basis. It is recognized that when teams of people work together, they may produce “extraordinary group creativity,” which is considerably different to what has been developed previously (Harvey, 2014). An example of this phenomenon may be seen in the Pixar animation studio, where interdisciplinary teams produce outstanding results (Catmull, 2008).

Using this approach agency, creativity is defined as the extent to which agency teams develop campaign radical or incremental ideas (and advertising strategy) to solve clients’ problems as perceived by managers. The radical/incremental notion is useful, as it may help organizations to match processes, teams, and resources with the particular type of creativity required.

## **PERFORMANCE**

The nature of the link between creativity and performance long has been examined in the general creativity literature (*e.g.*, Gong *et al.*, 2013; Shalley *et al.*, 2004; Zhou and Shalley, 2008). Further research reveals that campaign originality relates positively to market performance (Wang *et al.*, 2013)

From a team perspective, performance can take many forms ranging from new-product success (*e.g.*, Sethi 2000), new-product innovativeness (*e.g.*, Andrews and Smith, 1996), financial success of the team (*e.g.*, Sung and Choi, 2012), team creativity (*e.g.*, Shin and Zhou, 2007), client satisfaction (*e.g.*, Wang *et al.*, 2013), to customer-relationship performance (*e.g.*, Moorman and Rust, 1999). And, in many instances, performance may be measured at different levels, including organizational performance. For example, award-winning advertising campaigns often reflect the success of the team and the organization. In an advertising context, however, it is useful to identify whether the campaign produced by the team meets the client expectations.

**P7:** Agency creativity is positively associated with team performance

In summary, market conditions, need to be considered as a control variable. Teams are not resistant to external forces (*e.g.*, Mathieu Maynard Rapp and Gilson, 2008) and, so, where markets are turbulent or uncertain knowledge integration it is essential for teams to produce creative solutions (Sung and Choi, 2012).

In respect to the nature of the creativity, it is useful to again turn to “incremental”/“radical” creativity with respect to market conditions. The evidence suggests that creativity performance may vary depending on the sector in which the advertising agency is operating. In a highly competitive market with low dynamism (*e.g.*, a grocery food market), more creative advertising



(“radical” creativity) may be necessary to enhance performance. In a more static marketplace tried-and-tested “incremental” advertising may be more appropriate (Li *et al.*, 2008).

The indications are that market turbulence moderates the relationship between agency creativity and performance. As such, the following are suggested:

- P8:** The positive effect of agency creativity on performance is strongest when market turbulence is high.
- P9:** The positive effect of team knowledge utilization on agency creativity is strongest when market turbulence is high.

## CONCLUSION

In seeking to address the questions posed at the outset—the role of team knowledge utilization and agency creativity performance—the current authors have adopted a multidisciplinary approach. Integration of theory across disciplines has been offered, largely drawing upon innovation theory, along with existing advertising research, to offer new insights in understanding this phenomenon.

Agency creativity has been defined to reflect the nature of teams working to produce creative campaigns and builds on the idea that creativity is a multidimensional construct (Unsworth, 2001) by incorporating the dimensions of “radical” and “incremental” creativity. The authors of the current paper believe this approach may be helpful for agencies in terms of matching processes, teams, and resources to discover the type of creativity that a particular project requires.

It has been argued that diversity may improve agency creativity by generating more (and better) ideas through sharing knowledge, skills, and expertise. The authors contend, however, that the creation of more diverse teams is only a first step in terms of product enhancement. It is the utilization of the knowledge within the team that is critical to the success of creativity in agencies.

The authors also contend that agency/client relationships have an important role to play in the creation of successful advertising. Looking at the relational-tie-strength literature, the strength of the bond between the client and the advertising agency suggests that greater information-sharing may lead to more radical creativity. Clients who have close bonds with the agency generally enhance team knowledge utilization and, as a result, will experience enhanced creativity.

It also is understandable that, if a client is risk averse, there may be only a requirement for “incremental” creativity from an agency team. Risk and creativity have been investigated in other studies (*e.g.*, El-Murad and West, 2003; West, 1999), yet no links made to team knowledge utilization. Creative output generally may be classified as either “incremental” or “radical” and either might suit specific client needs. Incremental will be the more likely product of homogenous teams and radical more likely with diversity. When a client/agency relationship is in its infancy, the marketer may be more unwilling to take risks and want incremental creativity; once the client is comfortable with its new agency and the relationship has been well established, the client may be more willing to take risks and have an appetite for more radical creativity.

And even though incremental creative has its place for certain clients, the evidence points in the direction that radical creativity is positively associated with performance outcomes.

The type of problem presented by the client will direct the type of creativity required. A new product launch or repositioning of a mature product, for example, may need radical creativity to break through in the marketplace. Similarly, for a client coming to an agency with a pre-conceived problem, looking for a solution may lead to incremental creativity rather than radical creativity (Unsworth, 2001). The important issue here is to establish the true nature of the opportunity that the client presents.

The answer may lie in terms of market conditions (Li *et al.*, 2008) which may affect the brand under consideration or the teams assigned (*e.g.*, Mathieu *et al.*, 2008), making knowledge integration by teams critical for creative solutions (Sung and Choi, 2012).

## **MANAGEMENT IMPLICATIONS**

From a management perspective, the conceptual framework suggests a number of approaches to creativity and the development of agency teams.

Managing diverse teams will remain a challenge, but it is the best option when radical creativity is on the agenda for a client.

Where incremental is the order of the day, then the best option, from the point of view of “ease” of management, would be to establish a well-known harmonious/homogenous team.

Positive management fosters team creativity and it is only agency managers who can select and organize the needed diverse teams in tried and trusted ways to minimize potential (and actual) conflict. It’s no surprise to suggest that building strong relationships with clients is at the heart of team–creativity performance. In doing so, better access to data and insight has the potential to produce an improved creative product. Although agency creative output always will vary between the “radical” and “incremental” offerings as needed, the evidence suggests that management needs to encourage fresh radical thinking by allowing—and even encouraging—the freedom to fail.

Managing knowledge resources within teams is crucial as it allows everyone to learn, enhances their capacity to produce more radical creative solutions, and is a key capability for agencies.

Finally, managers might consider some internal market classifications to provide some insight as to what kind of team creativity might be the order of the day for a client, such as the nature of market turbulence or a client undertaking new product development.

## **FUTURE RESEARCH**

The authors’ intent in the current paper has been to provide a robust conceptual framework upon which to build empirical research on the nature of team creativity within advertising agencies. They hope that future researchers will build upon this framework as well as undertake research in the field to throw further light on this much-neglected area of team knowledge utilization and advertising creativity.

In particular, it is hoped that future advertising researchers will be able to provide further elucidation as to the role of gender and ethnicity on the performance of agency teams.

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